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## Responding to research

### An interview study of the teacher wellbeing support being offered in ten English schools

**Alex Manning**

*King's College London*

**Richard Brock**

*King's College London*

**Emma Towers**

*King's College London*

**Keywords:** Teacher wellbeing, wellbeing agenda, capabilities approach, policy enactment

- Responding to reports of poor teacher wellbeing, policy makers in England have begun to implement policy focused on supporting teacher wellbeing.
- Schools have begun to implement wellbeing support for teachers.
- Teachers report that the wellbeing support offered can have both positive and negative impacts on their wellbeing.
- Wellbeing support should aim not only to reduce in the moment feelings of stress but focus on structural changes.

**Purpose:** Responding to research reporting low-levels of teacher wellbeing in England, policy makers have begun to implement strategies to support wellbeing. Given the recent introduction of such policy, this exploratory study describes the wellbeing support being offered to teachers, and perceptions of its impact on wellbeing.

**Method:** A purposeful sample of ten schools (primary and secondary) in Greater London beginning to offer wellbeing support was selected and fifteen teachers were interviewed.

**Findings:** Teachers describe a range of wellbeing support strategies being implemented in their schools and report, in some cases, activities designed with good intentions can harm their wellbeing. We apply the capabilities approach to analyse the interviews and argue wellbeing support should be matched to the needs of recipients and support should increase teachers' freedoms to act, rather than simply mitigating in the moment feelings of stress.

**Limitations:** Findings of this small-scale study cannot be generalised to other contexts.

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*Corresponding author:* Alex Manning, School of Education, Communication and Society, King's College London  
Waterloo Bridge Wing, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Road, London SE1 9NH E-mail:  
alex.manning@kcl.ac.uk

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This special issue focuses on how research is used by governments both to develop policy and to change practice. In this article we examine how research that reports the poor state of teacher wellbeing in the English context (e.g., ES, 2019) has spurred a range of responses from both policy makers and from schools themselves (Hinds, 2019; Ofsted, 2019). We argue that a narrow conceptualisation of wellbeing has led to the introduction of interventions to support teacher wellbeing that are, in some contexts, experienced as unhelpful by teachers. We suggest that the application of the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999, 1995, 1993), which presents a broader conceptualisation of wellbeing, will allow the development of wellbeing support that is more likely to foster teacher flourishing. As teacher attrition remains a significant challenge facing English schools, teacher wellbeing has increasingly become a focus of research (Acton & Glasgow, 2015; ESP, 2018; Moore, 2018). In response to research on the impact of teacher stress on recruitment and retention (e.g. Cross & Hong, 2012; ESP, 2018; NEU, 2019; Teacher Toolkit, 2018) policy makers in the English context have begun to develop policies and interventions designed to support teacher wellbeing (Hinds, 2019; Ofsted, 2019). With only limited guidance available to policy actors in schools, this relatively novel policy agenda has been enacted in various ways in different contexts. This article has two aims: first, we critique how research on teachers' wellbeing has been represented by policy makers and realised in policy. Second, we report data from an empirical study describing teachers' experiences of the enacted wellbeing support in their schools. The study thereby captures an under-researched stage in the process of policy enactment during which schools respond to policy requirements while lacking guidance on how to interpret research to effectively enact policy in practice. Whilst the move to support teachers' wellbeing is laudable and well-intentioned, we argue that both policy and the enactment of policy in schools have, in some cases, been based on simplistic models of wellbeing that have led to interventions that teachers do not perceive to be supportive. The paper reports data from an exploratory study of the wellbeing support being offered in ten schools, including primary and secondary schools, in Greater London and teachers' perceptions of those strategies. We make use of the capabilities approach to argue that schools and policy makers should focus on interventions that increase teachers' freedoms to act in addition to strategies that minimise feelings of in the moment stress.

### 1.1 Articulating wellbeing and the wellbeing agenda

Wellbeing is a contested term that is used with a range of different meanings in the literature (Dodge, Daly, Huton, & Sanders, 2012; Kiefer, 2008; Salvador-Carulla, Lucas, Ayuso-Mateos, & Miret, 2014). Perhaps because of such ambiguity, public policy documents often fail to define wellbeing (Schulte et al., 2015), an omission that has significant practical implications as alternative interpretations of the term suggest different types of intervention. The variation in meaning of the construct can occur over several dimensions including: the conceptualisation of wellbeing as an intrapersonal or interpersonal construct; the subjectivity or objectivity of the construct; and the expected stability of construct over time (Ereaut & Whitting, 2008). First, a review (Salvador-Carulla, Lucas, Ayuso-Mateos, & Miret, 2014) of the use of the term wellbeing argued it has been used to refer to: i) a psychosocial-cultural construct that focuses on personal identity and relationship to others, ii) a psychobiological construct, that refers to the activation of brain systems, and iii) integrated models that include facets of both biological and person-centred models. However, such constructs may not be easily separable. An analysis of 86 articles drawn from a range of different domains (Kiefer, 2008) attempted to develop an integrated model of wellbeing. Kiefer's (2008) model of wellbeing argues mental, social and physical

aspects of wellbeing interact and have different priorities for different individuals. We believe that mental, social and physical aspects of wellbeing are inseparable and hence, like Keifier (2008), we adopt an integrated model of wellbeing.

Second, models of wellbeing vary by the degree to which the construct is assumed to be empirically measurable (Alatartseva & Barysheva, 2015). Objective measures of wellbeing, which measure aspects of the material environment such as the availability of financial resources, are contrasted with subjective measures, which report personal perceptions of wellbeing that are inherently private and difficult to quantify. Given the integrated construction of wellbeing used in this research, a subjective understanding of wellbeing is most suitable for our purposes, as whilst material aspects of teacher wellbeing (for example, the number of hours worked) are empirically measurable, an individual's sense of self and the nature of their relationships with others are, we argue, inherently subjective. Thirdly, Dodge and colleagues (2012) developed an equilibrium model of wellbeing, which proposes that humans have a default level of wellbeing from which they may temporarily deviate but typically revert to. They argue that wellbeing, though not directly measurable, is a state with relatively stable properties. Dodge et al.'s (2012, p. 230) definition of wellbeing as the state in which individuals have the 'psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge' acknowledges both psychological and social aspects of wellbeing, as well as the subjectivity and stability of the concept and hence is adopted in this work.

In the first decade of the new millennium, policymakers and social commentators began to study the impact of citizens' wellbeing on economic productivity and to propose interventions to support positive emotions — a movement labelled as the wellbeing agenda (Edwards & Imrie, 2008). Whilst this policy turn has focused attention on the importance of supporting mental health, the wellbeing agenda is based on several problematic assumptions. Firstly, individual welfare is often conceptualised in isolation, hence the onus of developing positive emotional states is placed on the individual (Sointu, 2005; Taylor, 2011) and social challenges can be reconceptualised as individual emotional deficits (Edwards & Imrie, 2008). Secondly, emotions, such as anger, are categorised as negative or undesirable, diminishing their potential to spur action to change the status quo (Ehrenreich, 2009; Nesse, 2019; Wilson, 2008). Thirdly, the presentation of an ideal emotional state stigmatises individuals who do not live up to an ideal archetype (Edwards & Imrie, 2008). These problematic assumptions of the wellbeing agenda have influenced approaches to supporting teacher wellbeing.

## 1.2 The English policy context: from blaming to supporting

The English state school has been the target of ongoing educational reform for more than three decades, with an intensification of education reform since 2010 by the then Coalition Government. Reforms have resulted in greater accountability measures in both primary and secondary schools and included significant changes to the curriculum and assessment procedures (Ball, 2017). Teachers are regulated by 'measures of productivity' (Jeffrey & Troman, 2011, p. 484) such as target setting, school league tables constructed by exam results, Ofsted inspections, performance management and performance related pay, that can cause teachers significant stress. Reports and surveys of teacher wellbeing frequently link tension and stress to the 'pressure cooker' of the audit and target culture which characterises many secondary schools in England (Perryman, Ball & Maguire, 2011). The deleterious effects of unrelenting policy reform on teachers' job satisfaction and wellbeing have been well rehearsed (Buchanan, 2010; Cross & Hong, 2009; Moore, 2018). These studies tell of the fear and anxiety that can be triggered by constant changes to education policy that have significant impacts on teachers' workload, pedagogy and practice (Cross & Hong, 2009). That teachers suffer stress is a predictable response to a system that holds them accountable for events beyond their control. Contemporary school culture can cause teachers to feel inadequate for experiencing a reasonable

response to challenging circumstances (Moore & Clarke, 2016). Three contemporary discourses have been particularly instrumental in making teachers feel responsible for their own wellbeing.

Firstly, the recent rhetoric of policy makers has both exaggerated teachers' responsibility for their wellbeing and stigmatised their experiences of stress. The former Chief Inspector of Schools, Michael Wilshaw (2012), suggested that teachers too often used stress as an excuse for poor performance, though he has since expressed regret for claiming that 'teachers do not know what stress is' during a speech (Vaughan, 2016). Michael Gove (2013a, 2013b), Secretary of State for Education between 2010 and 2014, criticised those who acknowledged the impact of societal factors on pupils' lives and located the responsibility for pupils' academic achievement with teachers. At the same time, Gove suggested that teachers should not experience Ofsted inspections as stressful and stated that he would not concern himself with teacher stress in driving through his reforms (Richardson, 2013). In addition to policy makers, media reports have implied that teachers use stress as an excuse to take time off work (Charlton, 2014; Sandbrook, 2017; Skyes, 2015). Secondly, parts of the teaching profession have come to fetishize stress. Stress is seen as a rite of passage for teachers (Miller & Fraser, 2000), and long hours and exhaustion are a badge of honour (Morris, 2015). This perverse association of stress with dedication creates a climate in which acknowledging an inability or lack of desire to continue under stressful conditions may be conceptualised as a personal failing (Dunham, 1992).

Thirdly, two constructs related to teachers' wellbeing, 'grit' and 'resilience', act to shift responsibility for stress from the school environment to teachers themselves. Grit is an umbrella term, which encompasses resilience, and refers to an individual's perseverance of effort and passion for achieving long term goals (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Being resilient is one aspect of being gritty (Perkins-Gough, 2013) and is the ability to reach 'good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Both resilience (Beltman, Mansfield, & Price, 2011) and grit (Hoerr, 2017; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014) have been proposed to be valuable teacher characteristics. Grit and resilience are problematic constructs as they neglect the impact of external factors on teachers' work, places the responsibility for change with individuals and discourage attempts to alter working conditions that harm wellbeing (Golden, 2017; Gorski, 2016).

A recent policy agenda in the English context has seen a new focus on supporting the wellbeing of teachers with a rhetoric that increasingly acknowledges the stressfulness of the systems teachers work within. In 2018, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) published guidance focused particularly on teachers' mental health in the workplace which emphasised the duty of care of employers to protect employees' mental health. They argue that teachers should be given achievable aims and that an individual's resources should be matched to the demands of their role. The following year, the then Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds (2019), announced a new expert advisory group on teacher wellbeing. Hinds, in a tone that departs from Gove's rhetoric, said that: 'I don't need to tell you how stressful it [teaching] can be ... I'm clear that your wellbeing is also something we need to prioritise' and acknowledged that a 'supportive' school culture was an important aspect of improving teacher wellbeing. In the same year, Ofsted (2019) released a report based on a survey of teacher wellbeing. Ofsted's findings suggest that teachers' wellbeing is threatened because practitioners felt alienated from the process of policy making ('they feel 'done to' rather than 'worked with' (Ofsted, 2019, p. 5)). Frequent changes to policy combined with an already high workload left teachers feeling de-professionalised and an emphasis on narrow assessment metrics resulted in practitioners being unable to focus on the kinds of learning they value. Ofsted reported that, in some contexts, undemocratic management practices left staff feeling alienated and that their autonomy had been limited. It is commendable that, in recent years, perhaps as the challenges of teacher recruitment have become more acute, policy makers are increasingly acknowledging that teacher wellbeing should be a policy focus.

In response to reports of teachers' stress, different approaches to supporting teacher wellbeing have been proposed (Bricheno, Brown, & Lubansky, 2009; McCallum, Price, Graham, & Morrison,

2017) and schools have introduced activities that are intended to mitigate stress: for example, mindfulness-based activities (Gold et al., 2010), massage, reflexology, (Health Education Partnership, 2012), Pilates and yoga (Bubb & Earley, 2004). As critiques of the wellbeing agenda suggest, such approaches treat stress as an individual failing and neglect to address systemic causes of stress. For example, it has been argued that, '[t]he key for teachers is to remember that much stress is within their control to manage using skills such as we have outlined' (Nagel & Brown, 2003, p. 257) and techniques such as meditation, 'diaphragmatic breathing' and '[s]cheduling twenty minutes once a day for quiet reflection' are recommended (Nagel & Brown, 2003, p. 256). Whilst these techniques may be successful in reducing teachers' in-the-moment feelings of stress, the interventions are palliative and conceptualise stress as a problem of the individual, neglecting external threats to teacher wellbeing (Hepburn & Brown, 2001). The burden of wellbeing is placed on individuals who are encouraged to adopt a desired emotional state: teachers should create a 'positive emotional climate' and 'maintain their personal positive qualities... in the face of stress' (Mandel, 2014, p. 6). The wellbeing agenda has created an environment in which teachers are placed into systems in which they are highly accountable and have high workloads, are encouraged to believe that they are at fault if they experience stress and are then commanded to improve their wellbeing without addressing the systemic causes of stress.

### 1.3 From a wellbeing to a capability agenda

In educational settings, interventions are often proposed by policy makers and leaders in order to achieve some outcome, often related to school performance (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). The capabilities approach critiques this assumption by reconceptualising people not as means to achieving some social goal but as individuals with agency whose personal freedoms should not be neglected in reform efforts. The concept of capabilities is a potentially fruitful alternative for reconceptualising the wellbeing agenda. Sen's (1995, p. 39) notion of capability as the 'beings and doings' a person can achieve expands the notion of wellbeing support from a strategy imposed from without to a conceptualisation of wellbeing support as developing people's capacity to cause change themselves. Sen (1999, p. 75) argued that, '[c]apability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning'. Limited capabilities, Sen proposes, can prevent people from living the kind of lives they value and harm their wellbeing. Rather than the palliative approaches sometimes suggested in the wellbeing agenda, the capability agenda would encourage teachers to identify aspects of teaching that are valuable to them, find areas in which they have freedom to enact change, and work together to achieve alternative approaches. Sen (1983) argued that simply considering the interventions given to people or their responses to them is too narrow a conceptualisation and that the manner in which people's freedom to be or act is changed is crucial. Giving a person who lacks access to transportation a bicycle might be imagined as supportive of their wellbeing, and in many cases would be, but if the roads in the recipient's area are in such poor repair that they prevent its use, their wellbeing will not be supported — their functionings will not be altered (they cannot travel further) and their freedom to act will not be enhanced.

Sen (1999) conceptualises freedom as of critical importance to human flourishing and argues that when people are deprived of freedom, they lack the ability to change their conditions and those of others. Sen defined capabilities as 'the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be' (Sen, 1993, p. 30). In the context of teacher wellbeing, interventions might be categorised by the degree to which they support teachers' freedom to act. Whilst interventions that reduce in the moment feelings of stress are doubtless valuable, they do not give teachers access to different functionings — once the intervention is complete, the teacher must continue to carry out the same stress-inducing tasks. By contrast, interventions which expand a teacher's capability set by, for example, giving them choice over how much homework they set, will have a



longer lasting and more profound impact on teacher wellbeing as they expand the teachers' freedom to act.

Many studies, both in the English context and internationally, have focused on reporting the causes of teachers' stress and poor wellbeing (Allen & Sims, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2016; Poppleton and Williamson, 2004; Schaefer, Long, & Clandinin, 2012; Struyven and Vanthournout, 2014; Worth et al., 2018). However, the relatively recent policy movement towards implementing strategies to support teachers' wellbeing has yet to be researched. Hence this study provides a novel contribution to the literature by asking:

- a) How is wellbeing conceptualised by teachers in primary and secondary schools in Greater London?
- b) What kinds of wellbeing support are being offered to teachers by schools?
- c) What are teachers' views of the wellbeing support offered by schools?

## 2 METHODS

We adopted a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990) in selecting schools for our study. Several parameters guided our school selection. First an internet search of schools within the Greater London region that mentioned the key word "teacher wellbeing" on their publicly accessible websites was carried out. Second, we removed schools from this search list which the researchers had professional or personal connections with, for example schools that were members of the university's teacher training partnership. Finally, we contacted individual schools via a gatekeeper, the headteacher, initially by email and then followed up, if necessary, with a phone call. In many cases, schools were not as responsive as anticipated so we relied on our professional contacts to approach schools that we knew offered wellbeing support to their staff. The study was carried out in alignment with BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines. The headteachers of the schools gave permission for the research to be carried out and teachers gave informed consent to be interviewed. All schools and teachers are referred to by pseudonyms throughout and teacher pseudonyms were chosen to preserve the gender and ethnicity of participants. The sample reflected a range in levels of experience and seniority. The participants are described in table 1, below.

A qualitative approach was adopted, and each teacher was interviewed once for between 30 to 60 minutes. The semi-structured interviews (Fylan, 2005) included questions focused on the current provision of wellbeing support within their schools and allowed the interviewers to respond to emerging themes with additional probes. All 15 interviews were transcribed and subsequently coded by the research team. Coding was carried out using a two-stage process (Saldaña, 2009): in the first stage, labels were attached to repeated characteristic noted in the interview transcripts. To increase the reliability of our coding, the researchers first coded all transcripts independently, then shared and revised code definitions, before recoding the transcripts (Saldaña, 2009). In the second stage, the first-stage codes were grouped into three major themes and the meanings of the codes were refined. Our analysis centred on participants' conceptualisations of wellbeing, and their views on wellbeing strategies provided by their schools. Themes were initially constructed from an inductive reading of the data and subsequently refined by focusing on themes coalescing around relational factors that affect wellbeing (including professional working relationships) and contextual and structural factors affecting wellbeing (including timetable and workload structures).

**Table 1: Participants' school types and roles. Teachers marked with an asterisk (\*) hold management responsibility**

	Schools	Teachers	Length of service
<b>Primary Schools (for students aged 5-11 years old)</b>	Red School	Steve, Deputy Head*	17 years
	Orange School	Anala, Wellbeing Lead and Assistant Head* Anna, Year 6 teacher (NQT)	19 years 1 year
	Yellow School	Stella, Assistant Head and Year 4 teacher*	10 years
	Green School	Jayne, Deputy Head*	15 years
<b>Total Primary School</b>	4 schools, 5 teachers		
<b>Secondary Schools (for students aged 11-18 years old)</b>	Blue School	Daniel, Head of Department*	29 years
	Indigo School	Bryony, Wellbeing Lead* Katrina, Deputy Head*	4 years 8 years
	Violet School	Rosie, Head of Department*	6 years
	Purple School	James, Classroom teacher	1 year
	Pink School	Sam, Deputy Head, Wellbeing Lead* Louise, Classroom teacher Hira, Senior leader* Asima, Trainee teacher	26 years 4 years 5 years 3 years
	Brown School	Paul, Veteran Classroom teacher	55 years
<b>Total Secondary School</b>	6 schools, 10 teachers		
<b>Study Totals</b>	10 Schools, 15 teachers		

### 3 FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Teachers' conceptualisations of wellbeing

Many of the participants initially struggled to articulate a definition of wellbeing but revisited and developed their conceptualisation as the interview progressed. For example, Daniel refined his model of teacher wellbeing over the interview to finish with a conceptualisation that resembled that of Dodge and colleagues (2012) equilibrium model:

"In the context of teaching, I would suggest wellbeing would mean the ability to cope with the emotional strains of the career, the role of a teacher in an English school and the strains, the emotional strains and the expectations that that role puts on you. The ability to cope with that role, and have that role not negatively affect one's mental health, so that one is able to maintain oneself in that role, and doesn't decide that the role is too demanding, and too challenging and having too much effect on their mental health." (Daniel, Head of Department, Blue Secondary)

The notion of balance occurred explicitly in many of the responses, including Rosie who argued that wellbeing required: "some sort of balance throughout the academic year with ... life outside school" (Rosie, Head of Department, Violet Secondary). Stella described how her wellbeing was impacted by an antagonistic relationship between school and personal life:



"I think it's really hard to put that time aside to be like right, I'm going to go and go to the gym today, or go swimming, or do an activity and try and, so you've got that release from work, and you've switched off and having that time where you can have that social life as well." (Stella, Assistant Head and Year 4 teacher, Yellow Primary)

By contrast, Paul, who, like Stella, constructed a distinction between school and personal wellbeing, conceptualised work as an important source of wellbeing. His model of wellbeing was centred around the concept of usefulness and contribution and hence his job was a significant source of meaning:

"Wellbeing, I mean it's... Feeling like that's your work and you're satisfied with what you're doing... It means you really feel quite satisfied by your lessons. And it means you've got a, have a feeling that the children are learning and enjoying their lessons... you've got feel you're doing something useful." (Paul, Classroom Teacher, Brown Secondary).

The challenge of making sense of the relationship between wellbeing in professional and personal aspects of life was articulated by Jayne (Deputy Head, Green Primary) who argued her definition of wellbeing depended on whether she had on her "deputy head hat" or her "human being hat" and she separated wellbeing into "personal wellbeing" and "teacher wellbeing". As the discussion developed, Jayne began to critique her own division between the personal and the professional arguing: "saying work/life balance means separating the two but actually everything's your life so, to me, wellbeing is about having a balanced approach to all of it actually".

As Kiefer (2008) predicted, individuals emphasised different aspects of wellbeing. For some teachers, the emphasis was on mental states: "I always think of wellbeing as, like, as far away from panic I guess, so as close to contentment." (Louise, Classroom Teacher, Pink Secondary). Others included physical and mental aspects in their wellbeing definitions: "...wellbeing just means being able to be healthy really overall. So, it's the physical health and the mental health and just being able to do with whatever daily things come at you" (Bryony, Wellbeing Lead, Violet Secondary). An aspect that shaped conceptualisations of wellbeing was participants' management responsibility. For the school leaders interviewed, their conceptualisations of wellbeing were conflated with their roles as managers and their own wellbeing was contingent on the wellbeing of the teachers they managed. For example, Sam reported:

"I think I very much see my job and my role looking out for what we can do to create a safe environment for staff in which, you know, staff feel enabled to be able to do their job effectively, to feel supported, to feel listened to and to look for opportunities where we can to help, you know, improve things... and I very much see that as part of my role as a deputy head, to enable those, you know, colleagues right across the school to be able to do that." (Sam, Deputy Head, Wellbeing Lead, Yellow Primary)

Indeed, the senior leaders we interviewed often reported that they felt responsible for the wellbeing of their staff: "I just think it's [wellbeing] about looking after the individuals, on many different levels" (Steve, Deputy Head, Red School). The introduction of teacher wellbeing as a policy focus can create a tension for school managers. As suggested by proponents of the capabilities approach, arguments for supporting wellbeing can treat individual wellbeing support as a means to reaching some performance goal (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Jayne articulated the tension she experienced as a leader in developing a conception of wellbeing that included both aspects of caring for her staff and a focus on improving the performance of her school:

“as a senior leader, my focus on wellbeing in terms of my responsibility for the school is that these teachers can perform, so whilst there’s a caring side to it, the other side to it [...] it’s about making sure they can perform and do their job well and that the children get the best out of them, which kind of sounds a bit, sort of, cold on that side of it, but that’s the ultimate truth, isn’t it?” (Jayne, Deputy Head, Green Primary)

Most of the teachers defined wellbeing as a dynamic concept, as in Dodge and colleagues’ model (2012), reporting changes over time, both within the school year and over the course of their careers. Anala described her experience as: “a rollercoaster ride, up and down, up and down, I did feel sometimes things were great and sometimes you just feel I can’t do this job.” (Anala, Wellbeing Lead and Assistant Head, Yellow Primary). Hira discussed moments of low wellbeing that were caused by structural features of her school’s systems:

“It fluctuates throughout the school year and it depends on whether there’s assessment weeks or there’s marking, you know, deadlines and things like that, I suppose ... there are quite a few pressure points because we assess our kids quite often.” (Hira, Senior Leader, Pink Secondary)

Whilst the diversity of models of wellbeing is unsurprising, they present a challenge for those seeking to develop approaches to supporting teachers. As the comments below indicate, different teachers can respond to same wellbeing support in different ways. Within the diversity of models of wellbeing one aspect was notably prominent - many of the participating teachers’ conceptualised wellbeing as, largely, their own responsibility.

### 3.2 Responsibility for wellbeing

As might be expected given some of rhetoric from policy makers and the media (Gove, 2013; Sandbrook, 2017; Wilshaw, 2012) the teachers interviewed often can felt that they were solely responsible for their wellbeing and neglected to consider the systems they worked within as a cause of stress. We found that there was a noticeable difference between how classroom teachers talked about responsibility for their own wellbeing with how school leaders talked about their responsibilities for *others’* wellbeing in the school. For example, class teacher, Louise (Pink Secondary) describes wellbeing as being “outsourced to the individual”. Similarly, the most experienced teacher in our sample, classroom teacher Paul, reported a sense of isolation that placed the onus for wellbeing on each teacher:

“There was not a lot of support and help from the school admin. You really had to deal with your own problems... And you have to find ways of solving it... You were very much on your own, I think. You feel very much on your own. In the classroom, it’s up to you to sort it out.... I tend to try and do it myself.” (Paul, Classroom Teacher, Brown Secondary)

Jayne recounted a time when her wellbeing was under threat and suggested that it was her life that needed to change and neglected to critique or request changes to the school system. Her extensive use of ‘I’ in the quote below, emphasised her isolation at the time she experienced low levels of wellbeing:

“And it was not the school, I just felt I need to change something because I’m too tied up in...it’s not just the school, I think it was just I think I needed...I recognised that I needed some sort of change in my life and I think if things, I could then see

that there were so many things that needed to change and there were so many pressures that actually, you know, if things had...I think if we'd had another year – and this sounds terrible to say it – with the current stage, I couldn't have taken it, so that's why I was going to leave, so almost like a survival mechanism." (Jayne, Deputy Head, Green Primary)

Beyond the negative rhetoric, participants also linked their tendency to assume high levels of responsibility as an aspect of the role. Teachers described that the vocational nature of their roles could be both a source of meaning and a cause of stress. Again, Jayne assumes the burden of responsibility for factors that are beyond her control:

"I think teachers get beaten over the head by that guilt of the children because you're doing a vocational job and it's almost as if you're some sort of charity worker and, you know, it's for the children, the children, the children, it's like this mantra and we all have it, then you end up beating yourself." (Jayne, Deputy Head, Green Primary)

Nearly all the senior leaders interviewed talked about how they felt responsible for the wellbeing of their staff. For example, Steve, a Deputy Head, said that as a senior leader it is incumbent on him to "keep an eye on absolutely everybody and make sure [they are OK]". Indeed the senior teachers interviewed reported that teachers can ask for help, as Stella (Assistant Head, Yellow Primary) explained: "So I think that in terms of sometimes supporting staff, that they know they can come and ask for help", but she also notes that teachers may find it difficult to ask for help, being concerned that they might be showing weakness. However, some of the senior leaders we interviewed did have words of criticism for the way in which other managers and those in charge managed staff wellbeing. For example, in some schools there is a more overt strategy driving isolation. Hira (Senior Leader, Pink Secondary) reported: "There's been times when people have been in the department office, or any other office, and certain managers have said, you know, 'you shouldn't really be having a chat'". Whilst the extent to which the strategy is deliberate or an unintended consequence of accountability cultures, situating the responsibility for wellbeing with the individual moves the focus away from changing school and national policies that harm teacher wellbeing. As Steve (Deputy Head, Red Primary) explained, "it sometimes relies on the personality of the individual leaders [to manage staff wellbeing] and I don't think they get enough guidance as to how they should be doing what they're doing in that sense".

#### **4 STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT WELLBEING**

Schools are to be applauded for the variety of creative strategies that have been developed to support teacher wellbeing. However, teachers' responses to the interventions are varied. The teachers interviewed described strategies which can be categorised as: a) those that improve wellbeing at a particular moment in time, for example activities such as yoga and Pilates; and b) structural changes in which changes are made to school systems, for example, reducing teachers' marking load. Teachers spoke positively about two structural approaches: those that developed professional relationships that made them feel valued; and changes to structural factors that changed their working environments, several teachers reported interventions that had harmed their wellbeing. As Ball and colleagues (2012) have argued, policy initiatives can have unintended consequences. The implications of such reports for the design of future wellbeing interventions are discussed below.

#### 4.1 Strategies that increase temporal wellbeing

The wellbeing agenda in schools has been driven by good intentions and has led to the introduction of activities that are effective at increasing wellbeing at a moment in time, so-called temporal wellbeing (Broome, 2004), but do not change the conditions that cause stress. Half of our participants referred to these sorts of activities, such as offering yoga classes, massage sessions, art classes and Pilates. Bryony (Wellbeing lead, Violet Secondary) spoke about these activities: "...the Head Teacher has agreed to pay for Yoga lessons and HIIT [High Intensity Interval Training – a form of exercise programme] training and a Head Space app [A mobile phone application that guides meditation practice]." Three of the participants, who worked in the same large comprehensive secondary school (Pink Secondary), described the staff 'wellbeing week' that took place several times over the year, although none of the teachers were aware how often it took place.

"They have a 'Wellbeing Week' here. They have a Teacher's Wellbeing Event. I think it either happened at the beginning of the year or yeah it can't be coming up. But they have an event. It is a week where they or a day where, it is instead of an INSET [In-service training session for teachers], and so they have like the PE running, like sporting events. And they'll have somebody doing painting and everyone offers something back." (Louise, Classroom teacher, Pink Secondary)

Rather than the sporting or artistic events, Sam (Deputy Head, Pink Secondary) observed that the most successful feature of the week was providing space for colleagues to meet and talk, something that was normally prevented by the school's size:

"... probably the most popular thing that we provide our staff throughout the whole staff well-being week is the hot breakfast because it also is a great opportunity for staff to come together. You end up catching up with colleagues who you may not necessarily see during the course of the day, particularly with such a reasonably large institution." (Sam, Deputy Head, Pink Secondary)

Overall, participants were not convinced that activities that increased temporal wellbeing were of value and were often introduced in a seemingly tokenistic manner to show that management was responding to concerns about wellbeing. For example, when describing activities such as massage sessions, Pilates classes and art classes, Jayne (Deputy Head, Green Primary) said, "I think the biggest part for me is not those things. Those are like, they're token things". Bryony (Teacher, Indigo Secondary) talked about these activities like "the staff football team and the Yoga sessions" as being "very much the tangible things that you get". Indeed, Hira (Senior Leader, Pink Secondary) explicitly raised the tokenistic nature of some wellbeing support: "I feel like it might be a bit of a show, you know, 'oh for our staff we have wellbeing week'".

Some interviewees reported that strategies introduced to support teacher wellbeing had a negative impact on teachers. Given a model of wellbeing as a balance between demands and an individual's resources (Dodge et al., 2012), responses to wellbeing interventions will vary between individuals. This observation is the basis of Sen's (1983) critique of the concept of wellbeing and underlies his bicycle analogy, described above. Though well-intentioned, strategies introduced to support teacher wellbeing can limit their freedom and so decrease their wellbeing. For example, Jayne (Deputy Head, Green Primary) reported: "the Pilates classes, the art classes, they tend to happen at a time when teachers are actually wanting to get on with their work". Strategies that boost the wellbeing of some teachers can reduce the wellbeing of others. Steve (Deputy Head, Red Primary) described a Headteacher who, he argued, gave "lip service" to wellbeing by introducing a monthly award for one member of staff in school assembly to value

their achievements. This approach, Steve calculated, made eight members of staff a year feel valued, but left thirty others doubting their contribution and feeling undervalued. He argued that:

“You’ve got to be really careful not to patronise adults. Don’t treat them like children. People don’t want certificates and the last thing they want is to be dragged into assembly. They don’t want any of that, they just want a day to day acknowledgement of what they do and if that is appreciated. And it’s far more effective to walk into a classroom and compliment the work and compliment the teacher and say “Thank you for that” than it is to come up with all sort of singing and dancing systems like employee of the month. People can see straight through that.” (Steve, Deputy Head, Red School).

Steve proposed that approaches such as yoga and Pilates classes would be appreciated only if managers also paid attention to ensuring all the other systems were working in a way that supported wellbeing. As argued above, Steve suggested that a systemic response to supporting wellbeing was necessary rather than ‘tokenistic’ strategies. This argument was echoed by several respondents but nicely expressed by Asima (Trainee Teacher, Pink Secondary) who commented: “It’s better for your wellbeing to have some me-time instead [of yoga]”.

## 4.2 Being trusted and valued

The capabilities model of wellbeing proposed in this paper argues that a sense of wellbeing arises from both beings and doings (Sen, 1983). Teacher wellbeing will be supported when teachers feel they have opportunities to pursue valued states of being. This conceptualisation of wellbeing as freedom to attain a state contrast notions of wellbeing which develop interventions that seek to simply reduce stress without. Nearly all the participants reported that their wellbeing was supported when they felt that their work was valued by those in their community. For example, Katrina spoke of the positive impact of being known and recognised by the leadership in her school:

“So the head teacher at Christmas... he hand writes cards for every member of staff to say thank you and they won’t just be ‘thank you’ and then his name, it will be a comment, you know, specifically about you, an individual comment. So he does it at Christmas and at the end of the year and it’s something that kind of creates a culture.” (Katrina, Deputy Head, Indigo Secondary School)

Teachers who spoke positively about the wellbeing at their schools tended to associate their perception with a wider culture that supported their wellbeing, rather than any one intervention. For Bryony, her sense of wellbeing arose from a sense of trust in her leadership team. Even though she didn’t have access to all the information that led to decisions being made she felt that “there is always a plan and a reason for things” (Bryony, Wellbeing Lead, Indio Secondary). As Daniel (Head of Department, Blue Secondary) emphasised, relationships between teachers and managers are vital for wellbeing, he spoke movingly about a time when he was working as a deputy headteacher and his relationship with the headteacher deteriorated with significantly negative impacts on his wellbeing. In some cases, changes that might be imagined as bringing extra burdens can enhance wellbeing by increasing an individual’s ability to contribute to activities they value. Anala (Wellbeing Lead and Assistant Head, Orange Primary) described how a promotion to head of a subject area supported her wellbeing in that she was acknowledged as making a valuable contribution by the school management.

### 4.3 Changes to school structures

Many of the schools in our sample supported wellbeing by making structural changes to school life to promote wellbeing. For example, Rosie (Head of Department, Violet Secondary) described that, whilst her school had not reduced teaching hours, her timetable had been structured to free up time for her teaching preparation and other administrative duties that she would otherwise need to do in her own time:

“...we’ve now gone from six to five periods a day, so it’s the same number of teaching hours but, you know it’s five lessons rather than six which in my book is great [...] I think you know, these things are good and we’re finishing at 2 o’clock on Fridays.” (Rosie, Head of Department, Violet Secondary)

A similar approach was reported in two of the primary schools. Anala and Stella spoke positively about being given an additional day of leave to support their wellbeing:

“We have given everybody a golden day this year... I think people have really felt quite valued, that they’ve been given a day’s paid leave as a golden day, which people have been able to book as and when they want to throughout the year.” (Anala, Wellbeing lead and Assistant Head, Orange Primary)

“... each class teacher can pick a day in the year and it’s going to be their mental well-being day and they can pick any day and they’re off, and [the Head] will cover the class which he’s really keen to do.” (Stella, Assistant Head, Yellow Primary)

Other structural changes to the termly timetables put in place in some of our participants’ schools included allowing teachers to take Preparation Planning and Assessment (PPA) time out of school and having periods of term when no deadlines or after school commitments were scheduled. For example, Stella described a “week every term where there’s no meetings and we try to make like no afterschool commitments or anything so you can leave at half three if you need to” (Stella, Assistant Head, Yellow Primary).

By contrast, when teachers felt that they were not valued as professionals, their wellbeing suffered (Ofsted, 2019). Louise (Classroom Teacher, Pink Secondary) reported that: “And that to me is like an element of lack of wellbeing. I’m like ‘well no one trusts me’. ‘No one trusts me to monitor my students on my own’ because I certainly don’t need data checks to do it.” She reported a “culture of distrust” in which monitoring was the norm and teachers’ autonomy was limited by treating professionals as if “you’re probably stealing pens”. Hira (Senior Leader, Pink Secondary) suggested that teachers’ expertise was undervalued by management in her school and their views and opinions were not recognised. Valuing of teachers need not involve expense or significant structural changes, for Louise having a manager say “We can see that your classroom practice is strong” or simply ensuring the printer paper were replaced when it had run out would contribute to a sense that her work was valued. Daniel (Head of Department, Blue Secondary) argued that teachers’ sense of feeling undervalued stemmed from recent government’s austerity policies, he argued “Properly fund the education service so that teachers feel valued, have a sense of professionalism, have the time to cope better”.

## 5 DISCUSSION: TEACHER WELLBEING AND CAPABILITIES

All our participants reported that their schools were aware that they needed to consider teachers’ wellbeing. The teachers interviewed who spoke positively of wellbeing interventions cited structural changes that enhanced their freedom to act. This included reducing some of the



monitoring practices in schools, changing the marking policies, altering data gathering practices and sharing resources. For example, Jayne (Deputy Head, Green Primary) spoke about removing observations from school practice to alleviate the stress felt by teachers:

“[The] majority of teachers just get completely stressed out by the [observation] process. So we put together [...] this programme and we called it collaborative development, I'm not coming in and, you know, watching you with a clipboard and telling you, picking your lesson apart afterwards and critiquing it.” (Jayne, Deputy Head, Green Primary)

Anna (Classroom Teacher, Orange Primary), a year 6 teacher in a primary school spoke about how the school had rewritten its marking policy and explained: “The school did review the marking policy... felt it was quite full-on and would take a lot of time. So, when that was reviewed that made a huge difference”. Similarly, Rosie (Head of Department, Violet Secondary) explained that she was keen to limit the time teachers in her team took to prepare their resources for lessons: “I've put in place resources that everyone has to use, has to use actually at Key Stage 3 because I don't want them using their time to prepare other stuff.” (Rosie, Head of Department, Violet Secondary).

Central to Sen's (1999) conceptualisation of capabilities is the relationship between wellbeing and the freedom to change one's conditions and those of others. The control teachers have over their working conditions, which can vary depending on their role within a school's management structure, can influence their wellbeing. A recent report has emphasised that teachers who feel that they have higher levels of autonomy are more likely to stay in teaching (Worth & Van der Bande, 2020). Teachers, like Paul, who felt they had limited agency to change the circumstances that caused them stress unsurprisingly suffered from low levels of wellbeing. By contrast, the value of enhanced freedom was explicitly acknowledged by Steve who reported that his transition from classroom teacher to senior leader in a primary school had enhanced his autonomy but commented that “I'm not the only one that's entitled to it, so how do we give other people that control as well?” Similarly, Rosie (Head of Department, Violet Secondary) reported that her promotion to a leadership role gave her access to additional information and that “I now know those things and so that makes me feel much less stressed”. Another senior leader (Sam, Deputy Head, Pink Secondary) conceptualised his role as a manager as removing barriers to ‘enable’ his staff to act effectively. Indeed, we found that the interventions reported by our participants that enhanced teachers' freedoms were approaches that appeared to have a significant and, potentially a long-term impact, on teacher wellbeing.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In this paper we have explored how the teachers interviewed articulated the concept of wellbeing and how they experienced the wellbeing support offered by their schools. The study was designed to be an exploratory examination of the wellbeing support offered in a small number of purposefully selected schools. Such examination of practice in a small number of contexts allowed the detailed consideration of contextual factors and the development of research questions that can be followed up in subsequent studies with larger sample sizes (Taber, 2000; Yin, 2009). Future research might explore national patterns of teacher wellbeing support and examine teachers' responses to the activities being offered. Such studies might be used to identify cases of good practice that may be useful for teachers enacting wellbeing policy in other contexts. The teachers interviewed perceived teacher wellbeing from both personal and professional perspectives. This is perhaps unsurprising given that teaching involves a combination of a teacher's personal and professional identities (Pearce & Morrison, 2011) and teachers'



personal investment in their work leads to a blurring between personal and professional identity (Day et al., 2005). For the participants, changes to school structures were particularly valuable for supporting teacher wellbeing, both by creating a culture in which teachers felt valued and by changing systems that created stress, such as assessment policies.

All the teachers interviewed wanted to be valued and trusted in their workplaces. Much of the support that made teachers feel valued was relational in character, for example, by developing the ways in which professional and collegiate relationships were conducted. However, structural changes to working practices were also welcomed, such as changes to timetables and reductions in workload that resulted in greater freedoms for teachers. By contrast, the teachers' responses to activities that supported temporal wellbeing, such as exercise or art classes, were mixed. Some participants felt that these interventions were tokenistic and, in some cases, the activities had unintended consequences that had an adverse effect on teachers' wellbeing.

Our sample included teachers with between one and 55 years of experience in the classroom. Some research suggests that more experienced teachers, particularly those who remain in the same schools, and those who attain posts of responsibility, are able to resist some of the more onerous demands on them and/or find strategies to create new ways of working which are rewarding and meaningful for them and thus potentially protect their sense of wellbeing (Day et al., 2005; Cross & Hong, 2009). We found no clear commonalities among those with similar levels of experience and how they viewed their school's wellbeing support. For example, a promotion gave Anala greater autonomy that supported her wellbeing, but this was not a generalisable trend in our findings. Contrastingly, the senior teachers in our sample felt the weight of responsibility for others' wellbeing despite occupying a more senior position within the school. This point was articulated by Steve, a primary school Deputy, explaining senior leaders need to "keep an eye on everybody". Further qualitative research could explore how different roles and levels of seniority might impact on teachers' perceptions and experiences of wellbeing.

The study has several implications for both policy makers and those enacting policy at the school level. First, at the level of governmental policy, whilst school leaders feel an urgent onus to support their staff wellbeing, they lack expertise and access to research and guidance for developing effective and contextually appropriate strategies. Policy makers should act to develop research-based guidance for school leaders on appropriate wellbeing support for teachers. Second, whilst some temporal wellbeing activities can be a valuable part of an overall wellbeing strategy, they often do nothing to remove the stressors teachers face and can prompt irritation rather than gratitude in staff. Third, schools and policy makers should not conceptualise teacher wellbeing as a means by which performance targets can be improved but focus on teacher flourishing as an inherent good.

We argue that Sen's (1999, 1995, 1993) capability approach is a useful conceptualisation for developing novel wellbeing interventions in schools. Two features of the capability model make it particularly useful for critiquing teacher wellbeing support. First, it suggests that schools and policymakers should develop strategies that focus on extending the freedoms available to teachers. Interventions that focus simply on improving temporal wellbeing, whilst useful, do not address school structures that harm teacher wellbeing and so provide longer-term remedy to threatened wellbeing. For example, Hira (Senior Leader, Pink Secondary) argued that her school wellbeing support made her feel: "they're [school management] going to be really nice to you for a week and you know the rest of the time you will be sad". Second, the capabilities approach suggests that support should be designed to match the contexts of teachers. Sen's example of a bicycle given to a person in an area in which the state of the roads prevents its use can be applied to the context of wellbeing support in schools. If support is introduced without an understanding of teachers' working conditions well-intentioned support can be perceived as an additional burden. For example, Jayne's (Deputy Head, Green Primary) description of how the Pilates and art classes put on by her school reported: "[wellbeing support] tend[s] to happen at a time when teachers are actually wanting to get on with their work". It is laudable that schools are

responding to research which reports the poor state of teacher wellbeing in English primary and secondary schools. However, the lack of a clear national wellbeing policy has resulted in a fragmented response from schools with a range of different strategies being applied in different contexts. Teachers in English schools urgently need both clearer policy and better thought through enactments of policy that are sensitive to teachers' contexts and lead to structural changes that will enable teachers to flourish in their roles.

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